

JOHN BOWLBY AND THE ATTACHMENT THEORY

When John Bowlby introduced his idea of attachment into the world of psychology, a different aspect of psychoanalytical behavior has been put into perspective. This brief explanation of Bowlby's work on attachment theory strives to inform the importance of attachment behaviors. Examples are provided to further interpret the concepts of the theory. Challenges were also presented to see it from a different view aside from Bowlby's. This essay also describes the importance of other researchers on his theory and how their respective work was incorporated. While I delved into this knowledge, I aspired only to learn and to share these to the readers.

John Bowlby, an English psychiatrist, developed the theory of attachment which discusses the relationship of an infant to his mother. In this theory, he described attachment as an integral part of the child's emotional development and social relationships. Exploring his professional life after graduating from Cambridge University in 1928, John Bowlby started out his career by observing two troubled children. An emotionless teenager who was kicked out of school and an anxious little boy struggled in developing their personalities which led Bowlby to reference these situations to their early family relationships (Bretherton, 1992). While studying psychiatry, Bowlby attended training under the supervision of Melanie Klein who stated that the children's emotional development was rooted in their own mental phantasies or underlying thoughts (Bretherton, 1992). Despite the opposite arguments, he still proceeded to write articles related to the difficulties in maternal-child relationships which eventually, would be the foundation of attachment theory. He went on to say that analysts back then failed to correlate children's real life events to their personality and behavior (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Not long after, he established his own research unit to solely focus on the effects of maternal deprivation and its connection to child development. In Bowlby's monograph entitled *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (1951) published by the World Health Organization (WHO), he explained specific reasons as to why children might be experiencing what he termed as "maternal deprivation". Maternal deprivation comprises a variety of situations of a child not experiencing a healthy relationship with his mother. One of those situations mentioned includes a mother who is unable to give love and care to her child despite living under the same roof (Bowlby, 1951). Unsurprisingly, in our time today, there are a lot of media content that tackles this situation that can potentially bring out problems in the early teenage years. Shows usually depict troubled adolescents who are victims of maternal deprivation. In that sense, John Bowlby is clearly a person of influence even in today's generation since his work became a theoretical basis on infants' and young children's development.

Published in 1969, the attachment theory had undergone reformulations and was influenced by a lot of researchers in the field. John Bowlby worked with notable people like Mary Ainsworth and Konrad Lorenz who provided great contributions in the theory (Bretherton, 1992). Mary Ainsworth started working with Bowlby at an early stage of the development of attachment theory. She worked under William E. Blatz, a Canadian psychologist, who formulated the security theory. Ainsworth, then, incorporated important aspects of “security” into the attachment theory with Blatz’ influence. The highlight of security entails the tendency of children to escape to an available parent figure to access comfort and reassurance when they sense fright (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Another aspect of the attachment theory involves its ethological basis which was spearheaded by Konrad Lorenz who formulated the imprinting theory. This theory sought to explain how young animals form attachment to the parent through visual and auditory stimuli (Stony Brook University, n.d.). Bowlby found imprinting in animals the same way in young children. Young birds were in emotional distress when they were separated from their mothers just like how young children were (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Years passed after attachment theory came into John Bowlby when he formulated its five concepts named: “*The Nature of the Child’s Tie to His Mother*” (1958), “*Separation Anxiety*” (1959), and “*Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood*” (1960) and the other two papers which were never published (Bretherton, 1992, p. 9). In the first concept paper, he explained that the infants’ attachment are shown through various behaviors like the act of sucking, clinging, and following in order to satisfy their physiological needs (Bowlby, 1958). It was also in this paper that he introduced the ethological basis of attachment through instinctive behavior. He also gave an example on chimpanzees wherein an infant clings to its mother as soon as it is born and on birds like ducks wherein the young ones follow their mother when scavenging food (Bowlby, 1958). The next concept paper, influenced by Christoph Heinicke and James Robertson, discussed how infants and children produce stress and anxiety when they were separated from their mothers even without the presence of fear (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The protest phase — the first of the three phases of separation developed by Robertson — was emphasized on their observation of a child who appeared to be stressed when separated from his mother by crying loudly or throwing himself onto something (Bowlby, 1960). Once again, an ethological basis was presented through the example of a rabbit wherein it escapes back to its burrow which is considered its “haven of safety” (Bowlby, 1960). According to Bowlby (1960, p. 97), “The haven of safety which terminates escape responses and brings a sense of security is proximity to mother”. In the third concept paper, he insisted on infants experiencing grief and mourning which correlates to the second phase of separation, that is, despair. The child, after experiencing separation anxiety, would later stop expecting for his mother’s return, making him disinterested in his mother. He also pointed out the similarities of the coping and/or mourning process of children and adults (Bretherton, 1992). Both children and adults showed “continuing

thoughts and fantasies about a deceased love object” after death (Baker, 2001, p. 61). This observation proved that grief and mourning is apparent in children when attachment becomes unavailable as opposed to Anna Freud’s claim that infants cannot experience such (Bretherton, 1992). All of these published concept papers received controversy and raised doubts on Bowlby’s view. Many psychoanalysts claimed that the mental aspect of child development was disregarded and that Bowlby exclusively focused on behaviorism (Bretherton, 1992).

The attachment theory would soon later be constituted into three volumes: attachment, separation, and loss. All of these volumes laid theoretical explanations of the mother-child relationship but the attachment received the most attention. The first volume included Ainsworth’s experiments in Uganda (The Ganda Project) and in Baltimore (The Baltimore Project). As part of the Baltimore Project, a miniature drama called The Strange Situation was one of Ainsworth’s most notable findings. In this 20-minute experiment, 1-year-olds were left in a playroom with their mothers, joined by a stranger afterwards. The mother would subsequently leave, followed by the stranger. It was observed that the babies would long for their mothers and would interact more in the presence of their mothers. However, an unexpected pattern of some babies expressing disinterest when reunited with their mothers caught Ainsworth’s attention (Bretherton, 1992). In this procedure, she was able to classify three attachment qualities namely secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent (Keller, 2018). It was intriguing that even at such a young age, babies would express feelings of ambivalence and confusion towards their mothers. If experienced repeatedly, these events could give way to feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction. I believe Ainsworth’s experiment could serve as basis for the behavior of struggling teenagers. Adolescents who grew up in “broken families” might feel a sense of longing at a certain period of time only and with the absence of the attachment figures, would eventually experience mistrust.

John Bowlby’s attachment theory continues to be a framework for many studies such that the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development included the importance of healthy childhood relationships in its practice (Cassidy, Jones, & Shaver, 2013). Furthermore, it is evident that his work is a critical influence on emotional problems present in the later years of individuals. In another study, it was presented that infants with adolescent mother might not be securely attached due to the fact that the mothers were still on their own developmental stage. According to Flaherty & Sadler (2011), factors such as “poverty, poor parental modeling, growing up in single-parent homes, and lack of educational opportunities and career goals” were most likely be the reasons for poor attachment outcomes. In this study, Ainsworth’s The Strange Situation was used as a method for the measurement of attachment which further proves that the contribution of attachment theory has been a structure in human development and social relationships (Flaherty & Sadler, 2011).

Attachment theory heavily implies that the emotional development of infants and young children are correlated with their relationship to their mothers. Throughout the years, individuals recognize more attachment figures in their family members, friends, and partners. What intrigued me about an application of this theory is its influence on adult romantic relationships. A study conducted by Simpson & Steven Rholes (2017) reported on the relationships of adults in regards to their attachment orientations. These orientations were classified as secure, insecure anxious, and insecure avoidant with an emphasis on the last two. When faced with the same stressors, highly anxious and highly avoidant individuals display different attachment needs. Anxious individuals turn to their attachment figures as soon as stress comes in, thus, requiring more attention and reassurance from their loved ones. In order to minimize such behavior, their attachment figures must provide care at a lesser degree to allow highly-anxious individuals to self-evaluate. On the other hand, avoidant individuals tend to become aloof and turn down help from their partners when faced with stress. Despite not wanting reassurance, they might view their partners as less emotionally involved which could lead to allowing these attachment figures to show support and attention (Simpson & Steven Rholes, 2017). This study has a close connection to proximity to attachment figures which is obviously one of Bowlby's feature in attachment theory.

Prior to learning about John Bowlby and his work, I have always regarded childhood as an important tool in developing emotional relationships with family members especially with parents. I believe that when a child casually shares his emotions to his parents, he can grow up to be more open and honest of his feelings. There would not be feelings of insincerity and lack of emotional support. Learning about the attachment theory, I have come to connect my understanding with his perspective on the emotional development of children. Although this theory indicates attachment behaviors of infants and young children, I believe their behaviors are maintained while growing up. In my case, I could recall one situation where I displayed attachment behavior/s explained by Bowlby. I remember crying when I was separated from my mother for a school interview or observation on the first day. Based on my perspective and memories, I believe that I was raised by less emotionally-involved parents which led to developing a silent or maybe, an avoidant personality. Furthermore, while doing my research on John Bowlby, I came across a study challenging the universal aspect of the attachment theory. Heidi Keller (2018) reported that the theory does not give any consideration to other cultures' parenting styles. This was exemplified by saying that non-traditional Western families like in farming villages attribute infant caregiving duties to children and to other members of the household such as grandmothers (Keller, 2018). The examples given by Keller diminishes the central role of mothers in infants' emotional development since these social relationships between the infants and other household members are considered important in non-traditional

Western families. I've learned that despite that the longevity of attachment theory, it is still a developing study to allow understanding of human development in diversity.

Despite the controversy, John Bowlby's attachment theory remains a groundwork and influence to psychology. It is beneficial not only to infants psychology but also to human development. Nonetheless, there is still a lot to learn and study on attachment behaviors. Questions on stability of attachment behaviors and cross-cultural differences are still left open. Different factors that affect children's emotional development can also diminish or affect the relevance of this theory. Moreover, these concerns only open opportunities for more researchers to expand the study on attachment. John Bowlby's work is a courageous reminder to continuously challenge and improve our knowledge on human development.

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